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ABSTRACT

Psychological theories continue to dominate the study of interpersonal communication, as is evident from dozens of introductory interpersonal communication textbooks. The perspectives most consistently missing from interpersonal textbooks are sociopolitical analyses of relational communication patterns, analyses that locate relational "problems" and "control" in society, rather than in the individual. The exclusion of critical perspectives may result from the discourse and audience of introductory textbooks as well. The voices of radical theorists are difficult to translate into the "polite" and "neutral" vocabulary and tone that characterizes textbook writing. The introductory textbook is a mass medium written to appeal to the majority of the assumed audience--that is, white, middle income, heterosexual students. Given the authority students often assign to information included in textbooks, the possible consequences of the bias may be significant. Consequences for students include: (1) when any perspective is promoted to the exclusion of others, there is a risk of indoctrination rather than education taking place; (2) the psychological bias may encourage the view that any human conflict can be overcome by changing communication style or behavior; and (3) a multitheoretical approach might encourage a more analytical and less personal method of studying interpersonal communication. (Contains 14 references.) (RS)

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"Beyond Sharing and Caring: Theoretical Biases in Interpersonal Textbooks"

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JP
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"At the heart of most relational communication theories," according to Stephen Littlejohn, is an emphasis on the cognitive psychological processes that shape relational "expectations." (1992, p. 262). Even those theories that focus on the relational level are based on, or at least incorporate psychological analyses of individual perception and response. (pp. 284-290). Despite the frustration some relational communication theorists have expressed, according to Leslie Baxter, with this "atomistic orientation", psychological theories continue to dominate the study of interpersonal communication (Baxter, cited in Littlejohn, p. 290).

This theoretical bias is evident in introductory interpersonal textbooks, at least in the dozens that I have reviewed and used during the past fifteen years. The perspectives included in textbooks are significant, because they come to represent, in Michael Apple's terms, "What is to count as legitimate content within particular disciplines and thus what students are to receive as official knowledge." (1985, p. 154). For the same reason, those perspectives that are excluded or marginalized become significant as well, as they are denied, at least implicitly, as "legitimate content." Therefore, it would seem worthwhile to examine theoretical views consistently excluded from interpersonal textbooks, explore some possible reasons why, and the potential consequences for students that may result from the psychological bias in these textbooks.

The perspectives most consistently missing from interpersonal textbooks are sociopolitcal analyses of relational communication patterns, analyses that locate relational "problems" and "control" in society, rather than in the individual. Historical analysis may be equally ignored, by the way, but I'm not going to address that directly. Although some textbook authors, Sarah Trenholm, for example, acknowledge the validity of critical theories, and the "immense effect" political contexts can have on relationships (1991, p. 26), this type of analysis is rarely applied. Even in textbooks that address issues such as intercultural communication, social contexts, race and gender, these issues are most often discussed from a psychological perspective, focusing on themes such as the "alienation" of the individual or differences in communication "styles." (See, for example, Adler & Towne, 1990, pp. 182-187; DeVito, 1992, pp. 242-243; pp. 253-269; Mader & Mader, 1990, pp. 151-183; and Trenholm & Jensen, 1992, pp. 400-401).

A few specific examples might help to clarify the type of perspectives I'm referring to. The first example comes from Sonia Johnson's analysis of "failed" relationships in the context of a patriarchal value system, one which promotes self-denial, especially for women, "ownership" and self-blame. This brief excerpt reflects the location of relational "failures" I referred to earlier. She says:

> I strongly suspected by this time that the problem was systemic, not personal...I realized that we do not fail at [relationships] because we are co-dependent, or afraid

> of intimacy, or wounded by incest, or fraught with patterns picked up in families that by definition do not function, or addicted to this and that. Though these problems don't make the [relationship's] path smoother, the reasons we fail are ultimately not personal at all. We fail because failure is built deliberately into [patriarchal] patterns of relating. (1991, p. 73)

The theme of "ownership" appears again in the second example, an excerpt from Alexandra Kollontai's Marxist analysis of relational values and behavior in the context of social class values. She suggests that:

> It is the bourgeoisie who have carefully tended and fostered the ideal of absolute possession of the contracted partner's emotional as well as physical [being], thus extending the concept of property rights to include the right to the other person's whole spiritual and emotional as well as physical [being]. (1911, pp. 310-311).

Kollontai elaborates on how these values in turn lead to phenomena such as "jealousy" and what she terms the "false" perception of rapidly escalating intimacy. Since this piece was written in 1911, it provides an historical as well as political perspective on how relational mores have been defined.

The final example of this type of political, contextual view comes from Patricia Hill Collins' analysis of how systematic, targeted oppression "infiltrates" and damages interpersonal relationships. In her words:

> The fact that whites know that Blacks are human, the fact that men love women, and...that women have deep feelings for one another--must be distorted on the emotional level of the erotic in order for oppressive systems to endure. Sexuality and power on the personal level become wedded to the sex/gender hierarchy on the social structural level in order to ensure the smooth operation of race, gender and class oppression. Recognizing that corrupting and distorting basic feelings human beings have for one another lies at the heart of multiple systems of oppression opens up new possibilities for transformation and change. (1990, pp. 196-197).

These examples clearly represent a radical theoretical departure from the psychological view, suggesting that "unhealthy" and destructive communication patterns are often an inevitable consequence of sociopolitical conditions and values, rather than individual "pathology." They can also be described as "radical" in a more narrow political sense as well. If one grew up in the 1960's, as I did, it is tempting to assume that their exclusion from interpersonal textbooks is the result of a right wing conspiracy. However, although that might be part of the story, the explanation is no doubt more complex than that.

Mark Knapp and Gerald Miller offer an historical explanation for the emergence of psychology as the dominant perspective in the study of interpersonal communication. They suggest that the study of this subject came into its own in the 1960's, in a "climate of

concern", in their words, "for self-development and personal awareness", evidenced by the popularity of encounter and sensitivity training groups. It is understandable, in this context, how books such as *Pragmatics of Human Communication* came to have "a profound effect on the subsequent study of interpersonal communication." (1985, pp. 8-9).

This "climate" is perhaps even more pervasive in our own time, with the proliferation of self-help, support and twelve step books and groups, and the near "orgy" of self-disclosure taking place on television talk shows. "Superficial" Psychology, and the oversimplification of the role of communication in our personal "wellness", are popular ideas in America, and are, unfortunately, sometimes reflected in the tone and content of interpersonal textbooks. The theories themselves may not be superficial, but the compressed format of the textbook often results in superficial treatment, and therefore understanding, of complex ideas.

Other scholars have discussed how the American ideology of individualism has influenced research in general, promoting theories that emphasize "individual autonomy" and "personal responsibility for success or failure", for example. (See Littlejohn, 1992, p. 5; and Sampson, 1977, p. 779). Media theorist Sari Thomas sees this theoretical bias as the result of what she calls "the meritocratic philosophy of American capitalism." She claims that, "In general, in the United States we like theories that stress our individual differences and emphasize the control we have over our own destinies." (1990, p. 334).

There is no doubt that ideology plays a significant role in shaping theoretical perspectives. However, the ongoing psychological bias in interpersonal textbooks may have as much to do with what Michael Apple refers to as "the culture and commerce of the textbook" itself. He argues that "increased competition" in the textbook business discourages risk-taking. (1985, p. 152). This results in the tendency to market textbooks "with a standard content, that, with revisions and a little bit of luck, will be used for years to come." (p. 154). The striking similarity of tables of contents of interpersonal textbooks over the years lends support to his argument. Maiamne Whatley, who analyzed photographic images in textbooks, agrees that editors are probably more interested in profits than in "imposing any educational agenda", in her words. (1992, p. 200).

I would add that the exclusion of critical perspectives may result from the discourse and audience of introductory textbooks as well. The voices of radical theorists are difficult to translate into the "polite" and "neutral" vocabulary and tone that characterizes textbook writing, and that the medium seems to demand. It is also possible that the ideas of some political theorists--for example, Sonia Johnson defines herself as a "lesbian separatist"--may be viewed as too controversial for the consciously inoffensive semantic environment of the textbook. Finally, the introductory textbook is a *mass medium,* written, in my view, to appeal to the majority of the assumed audience--that is, white, middle income, heterosexual students. More "targeted" analyses,

addressed, for example, to working class, minority or gay and lesbian readers, may be viewed as too "limited" in appeal.

These various factors related to ideology, economics and textbook form may help to explain the enduring psychological bias in interpersonal textbooks. Given the authority students often assign to information included in textbooks, the possible consequences of this bias are especially significant to consider. One consequence is that when *any* perspective is promoted to the exclusion or marginalization of others, there is the risk of "indoctrination" rather than "education" taking place. The implicit message in this case is that psychological theories, generated by "traditional" social scientific research, provide the only valid perspective for analyzing interpersonal communication patterns. The absence of alternative viewpoints also encourages the misperception that psychological theories are "neutral" and "objective", rather than one of several ideological perspectives.

The psychological bias may also encourage the view that any human conflict can be overcome by changing communication style or behavior. The attempt on many campuses to enforce "speech codes" as a response to increasing hostilities along lines of race and gender, is one example of this view. The dismal *failure* of many of these efforts may indicate, as some critical theorists suggest, that understanding how deeply embedded certain interpersonal conflicts are in institutionalized values--including those of the "academy"--may be a necessary part of the process of change.

There is no guarantee, of course, that these perspectives would lead to behavioral changes, or generate agreement on whether changes in values are necessary or desirable. A multitheoretical approach, however, would at least provide a framework in which to examine interpersonal conflicts in a broader social and political context, and provide students with a greater repertoire of responses from which to choose. It might also help them recognize that not all conflicts are their personal responsibility, or within their power to resolve, no matter what communication "techniques" they use.

Finally, a multitheoretical approach, one which refers to but doesn't exclusively emphasize Psychology, might encourage a more analytical and less personal method of studying interpersonal communication, a change for the better as I see it. The dominance of psychological theory and discourse in textbooks can lead to an interpersonal classroom that adopts the tone, vocabulary and even purposes of a therapy group. The usually desirable process of applying theory to experience can create serious boundary violations when the theory refers almost exclusively to issues such as "self-esteem", "hidden selves", "failed relationships", "family communication history", etc..

An increasing number of students at Western, for example, have reported feeling "threatened" and "invaded" when prodded and even required to disclose personal information in the context of class discussions or assignments. This has led my colleagues and I to reevaluate the legitimate purposes and interaction rules of the

interpersonal communication course. These purposes would seem to include more analysis of interpersonal contexts, definitions and discourse, from a variety of perspectives, and less probing of individual psychology and personal histories. When the communication teacher assumes the role of "counselor" in the semantic environment of a classroom, serious ethical questions may arise. A multitheoretical approach would treat psychology as only one of several perspectives on communication, rather than employ it as the primary vehicle for analysis and discussion.

To summarize, then, the bias toward psychological theory and discourse in interpersonal textbooks discourages a mulitheoretical framework for analysis, especially one that includes critical theories. This bias may also, at times, encourage a blurring of the boundaries between a communication class and a therapy group. Certain elements of the textbook medium, for example the obligation to be "inoffensive" and the compression of complex ideas, makes it difficult to overcome these trends, when the textbook is the only, or even primary source of information. For these reasons, my somewhat reluctant answer to the question, "Why are we still using textbooks?", is--at least in the case of my own interpersonal courses--"I'm not."

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